

Developing Cultural Self-Awareness and Knowledge to Enhance Intercultural Competence of Foreign Language Students

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3.1. Cultural Self-Awareness and Knowledge as Prerequisites of Intercultural Competence

Both teachers and learners of foreign languages need to realize that one of the basic assumptions of intercultural communication is that a common language shared between the participants of an intercultural or international exchange is a necessary but insufficient condition for achieving success. Irrespective of the level of their linguistic competency, representatives of different cultures may communicate better thanks to their understanding of the nature of the process itself and of the interlocutors' socio-cultural backgrounds.

Foreign language learning has always involved acquiring elements of the target language culture. In the case of English, because of its status as *lingua franca*, it is equally important to consider a variety of cultural backgrounds represented by all non-native speakers using English as a common language for communication. Therefore, the concept of intercultural competence, independent of any particular language or culture, has gained its popularity in TEFL. Since it can be developed irrespective of one's fluency in a given language, both native and nonnative speakers have equal chances to make it their asset in intercultural communication. Non-linguistic cultural knowledge and skills may be either taught in extra courses or integrated into foreign language teaching. Setting priorities for teaching or learning a foreign language involves choosing the most suitable model of communicative competence to follow. Acknowledging that intercultural competence is an inseparable element of intercultural communicative competence, as in Byram's model (1997), seems to be a natural approach in most European educational contexts.

Cultural self-awareness and knowledge are essential to one's intracultural competence, which together with the understanding of one's interlocutors' cultures and of the nature of the process of communication itself, is required to establish intercultural relationships and communicate successfully. This view has been made clear in various definitions of intercultural competence, which may be seen as the ability "to cope with one's own cultural background in interaction with others" (Beneke 2000: 108–109), or "to see yourself as others see you, to respond to them in the light of that, and to interact with them in the light of that" (Byram 2003).

All five components of intercultural competence, as described in Byram's model (1997), assume the need to develop one's cultural self-awareness and knowledge, which may be illustrated as follows:

- Attitudes, which comprise readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own, requiring such conditions as:
 - Interest in discovering other perspectives on interpretation of familiar and unfamiliar phenomena both in one's own and in other cultures and cultural practices.
 - Willingness to question the values and presuppositions in cultural practices and products in one's own environment.
- Knowledge of social groups and their products and practices in one's own and one's interlocutor's country and the general processes of societal and individual interaction, involving such factors as:
 - Knowledge of historical and contemporary relationships between one's own and one's interlocutor's countries.
 - The national memory of one's own country and how its events are related to and seen from the perspective of other countries and one's own country.
 - The national definitions of geographical space in one's own country, and how these are perceived from the perspective of other countries.
 - Institutions and perceptions of them, which impinge on daily life within one's own and one's interlocutor's country and conduct and influence relationships between them.
 - The processes of social interaction in one's own country.
- Skills of interpreting a document or event from another culture, explaining it and relating it to documents or events from one's own require to identify ethnocentric perspectives in a document or event and explain their origins.
- Skills of discovery and interaction assume knowledge of one's own and one's interlocutor's country and an ability to use it in order to:
 - Identify significant references within and across cultures and elicit their significance and connotations.
 - Identify similar and dissimilar processes of interaction, verbal and non-verbal, and negotiate an appropriate use of them in specific circumstances.
 - Identify contemporary and past relationships between one's own and the other culture and society.
 - Use in real-time knowledge, skills and attitudes for mediation between interlocutors of one's own and a foreign culture.

- Critical cultural awareness/political education is based on an ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries (Byram 1997: Ch. 3).

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (2001), the seminal publication of the Council of Europe, proposes that foreign language teaching should involve preparing the learner "to fulfil the role of cultural intermediary between one's own culture and the foreign culture and to deal effectively with intercultural misunderstanding and conflict situations" (The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages... 2001: 104). Therefore, the list of general competences needed by a foreign language user includes intercultural skills, which are connected with "the ability to bring the culture of origin and the foreign culture into relation with each other," the user's "willingness to relativise one's own cultural viewpoint and cultural value-system" as well as "willingness and ability to distance oneself from conventional attitudes to cultural difference" (The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages... 2001: 104).

3.2. Cultural Self-Awareness and Knowledge as One of the Principles of an Intercultural Approach to Foreign Language Teaching

The teacher who decides to focus on developing intercultural communicative competence, including intracultural competence, needs to adopt the basic tenets of an intercultural approach to foreign language teaching, which makes the following assumptions:

- Cultural dimension is an integral element of foreign language teaching.
- Language teaching has general educational aims.
- One of the aims of communication in a foreign language may be expressing one's identity and building relationships with the representatives of other cultures.
- Achieving the competence of an intercultural mediator rather than native speaker proficiency is the aim of the foreign language students.

An intercultural approach to foreign language teaching has an eclectic nature and draws on:

- An ethnographic approach, which equips the students with necessary knowledge, attitudes and skills in order to prepare them to become independent participants in, observers of, and commentators on any culture (including their own). Students should take a reflective and critical attitude while gathering factual information. Projects involving "home" and "virtual" ethnography are particularly recommended.

- A comparative approach, in which the students are constantly expected to make cross-cultural comparisons, and gain critical awareness of one's own cultural norms, as well as those of other cultures. Students are encouraged to draw on their cultural self-knowledge and reflect on their cultural identity and mother tongue. Foreign and native authentic materials are sources of cultural information and issues for analysis. Representing a variety of styles, points of view, etc., they allow knowledge to be constructed individually without copying stereotypes.
- An experiential approach, which promotes learning from immediate experience and engaging the learners in the process as whole persons, both intellectually and emotionally. Teaching tasks should help develop the students' autonomy through their individual critical analysis of information acquired from a variety of sources (including the media and the Internet; cf. Bandura 2006: 353–358).

An intercultural approach to teaching reading and writing shares common interest with a sociolinguistic view of first language critical literacy development. They both emphasise the importance of the students' awareness of the socio-cultural context of communication. The students who acquire reading competence in their native language need to develop their "contextual socio-cultural schemata," that is "knowledge about context, about readers' and writers' roles, and about the values and registers of cultures and communities" (Johns 1997: 15). Similarly, critical reading and writing in a foreign language would require the students to consider the following aspects of the situational and cultural dimensions of context:

- the intended audience's values and knowledge assumed by the text
- the text's purpose, i.e., its cognitive and emotional effects on the readers
- the text's register, the narrator's tone and ideological point of view
- what the text is responding to or against (Kramsch 2000: 60–61).

It is in foreign language reading or writing classes that the students may have their first opportunity to analyse the socio-cultural context, and practise their critical skills crucial to interpreting texts in both mother tongue and foreign languages. The students' assumed intracultural awareness is expected to enhance their acquisition of intercultural competence, at the same time an intercultural approach encourages activities that stimulate the development of cultural self-awareness and knowledge in a foreign language lesson. Intracultural dialogue during intercultural activities makes foreign language education contribute to the students' and teachers' "personal sociocultural development" (Aleksandrowicz-Pędich 2009: 24).

Intercultural education has to be sensitive to the question of identities (Wilczyńska 2005: 26). Having a unique opportunity to take responsibility and help overcome problems connected with potential cultural conflicts, foreign lan-

guage education has to face an inevitable paradox. On the one hand, intercultural contacts in our globalised environment result in greater openness towards foreign cultures and minimize the danger of isolation. On the other hand, they can make less expansive cultures feel threatened by extinction or marginalization, which may provoke their hostile reactions in order to protect their cultural identities; alternatively, inferiority complex and frustration may lead to the superficial uncritical adaptation of the cultural patterns of more dominant cultures (Wilczyńska 2005: 24). Intercultural education needs to strike a balance between these two approaches and address the issue of regional or national identification. Nikitorowicz (2001: 66) argues that what the prospective participants of intercultural encounters need alongside their awareness of cultural identity is the sense of security, self-esteem and self-acceptance. Still, exploring one's own cultural identity may be a true challenge for various reasons, for instance in such communities as Belarus "which is reputed to have a notoriously weak national identity" (Korshuk 2008: 85). To realize that an intercultural mediator accepts one's own cultural identity and knows how to present it to others is equally important for students and foreign language teachers, who should consider it among their professional competences (Nizegorodcew 2007: 266).

Educators interested in an intercultural approach need to be aware, however, of the factors that hamper the process of developing intercultural competence in the language classroom. Although most teachers may welcome the opportunity for foreign language teaching to pursue the cultural content and skills oriented syllabus, they will have to face the backwash effect of the grammar and lexis oriented assessment system. Last but not least, many teachers' unwillingness or inability to handle cultural topics as well as time-consuming preparation of cultural activities result in the challenge being taken up only by the most enthusiastic and creative professionals.

3.3. Developing Cultural Self-Awareness and Knowledge During Intercultural Activities

Foreign language students can use a variety of primary and secondary sources in both first and foreign languages to provide them with specific knowledge of their own culture. For example, facts and statistics can be found in newspapers, periodicals and publications in sociology, cultural studies and history, whereas literature is a great source of real life stories or examples of cultural stereotypes. National cultural profiles and cross-cultural comparisons can be studied from the classics such as E.T. Hall or G. Hofstede, as well as numerous handbooks of business communication. In addition to self-study, written or visual material selected by the teacher with appropriate tasks for classroom practice should contribute to the development of students' skills and attitudes, and eventually a greater awareness of their own culture.

3.3.1. Intercultural Tasks and Teaching Materials

In order to develop students' cultural self-awareness and knowledge during intercultural activities teachers can design their own materials or select from various publications bearing in mind that:

- Students develop their autonomy and critical skills when they are encouraged to analyse individually information acquired from a variety of sources, including the media and the Internet.
- Projects involving “home” and “virtual” ethnography require prior development of various research skills and attitudes.
- Making cross-cultural comparisons activates students' knowledge of their own culture.
- Texts representing various styles and genres in both native and foreign languages are useful for comparing different cultures, as well as diverse views and beliefs in the same culture.
- Texts and visuals that question stereotypes or homogeneity of cultures allow students to construct knowledge individually.
- Texts about critical incidents illustrate the influence of socio-cultural knowledge on the effectiveness of communication.

A number of ideas that inspire creativity and may be adapted for intercultural activities can be found in published supplementary teaching materials, either “local” (written for a specific cultural context), e.g. *British Studies Materials for Polish Teachers of English – A Cross-Cultural Approach* (2000), or “global” (designed to be used or adapted in various contexts), e.g. Huber-Kriegler M., Lázár I. and Strange J. (2003). *Mirrors and windows. An intercultural communication textbook*. The authors of the latter believe that their activities help the students reflect on their own “culturally determined values, behaviour and ways of thinking, and this leads to discovering other cultures, to negotiation of common ground or developing respect for others” (Huber-Kriegler, Lázár and Strange 2003: 9). For example, in Unit 2, devoted to eating habits, students are asked to brainstorm both denotative and connotative meanings of “bread” in their mother tongue, as well as to translate and compare food idioms and proverbs in different languages. Literary quotes and different attitudes to the notion of “romantic love” in the students' own languages and cultures are discussed in Unit 5, whereas idioms reflecting preconceptions, stereotypes and prejudices, about people from other cultures are presented and discussed in Unit 7.

Tasks and materials for stimulating intracultural dialogue in groups and for students' individual reflection on different aspects of their own culture include the following:

Artefacts and symbols. What would you put in a “time capsule,” which will be opened in a hundred years’ time by someone curious to find out about the past of European civilisations?

How would you design an open-air ethnographic museum called “My country in miniature”?

Values. Compare the text and origins of the best known poem in your country/your country’s national anthem to a similar text from a different culture (adapted from Byram and Zarate 1995: 37).

Read “Seven ways to annoy a Scot” (British Studies Materials 2000: 47), a humorous list of conversational pitfalls, and compose a similar one for someone unfamiliar with your culture.

Stereotypes and taboos. Critique a traveller’s guidebook or E. Lipniacka’s *Xenophobe’s Guide to your country*.

What stereotypes of your compatriots or foreigners can one find in literature written in your mother tongue or foreign languages? (adapted from Aleksandrowicz-Pędich 2009: 30).

Behaviour. In groups try to reach consensus about guidelines for foreigners unfamiliar with your culture’s etiquette.

To what extent can we talk about typical behavioural patterns in a given culture e.g. eating habits or ways of spending free time? Check through a survey/questionnaire conducted in and outside your class (adapted from Aleksandrowicz-Pędich 2009: 25).

3.3.2. *Intercultural Projects*

Exploring one’s own culture through a project, although by its very nature requires more time and effort taken outside regular classes, can be surprisingly rewarding and enriching at the stage of analysing and presenting its outcomes. Projects that involve an exchange of information and opinions with the representatives of other cultures provide the students with an opportunity to practise cultural translation and negotiation of meaning, and in this way give insights into the relationship between a language and its culture. On the other hand, projects based on “home” ethnography may reveal unexpected results about behaviours, beliefs and values shared in the community the researcher belongs to. One of the best ways to understand the influence of shared values on actual behaviours is through discussing critical incidents, first in monocultural groups and then with the representatives of other cultures.

This method was adopted in the “Interactive Cultural Detective” learning game “for the development of intercultural communication competence skills

and for a deeper understanding of the native culture of the participants” (see www.culturaldetective.com in Korshuk 2008: 86–87). Groups of Belarusian and Swedish university students were provided with a set of critical incidents from both their home and foreign cultures. They discussed the possible cultural values that led to the described words and actions as well as “the cultural bridges,” that is recommendations to both parties on how to resolve the cultural clash, and what to do in order to avoid similar cultural misunderstandings in the future (Korshuk 2008: 87). While gaining awareness of the fact that a person’s actions are perceived and interpreted through “cultural lenses” the students honed their decision-making skills and developed “a non-evaluative approach to the analysis of people’s actions” (Korshuk 2008: 89).

Cultural self-awareness raising projects may help to understand the complexity of national identity and to mediate it to others. The participants of a Bulgarian project were first asked to critically analyse certain visual images or literary texts, e.g. stories read in childhood and myths that are part of the national heritage. By questioning interpretations that are taken for granted in their own world the students developed “a critical cultural personality” (Tarasheva and Davcheva 2001: 45). While selecting stories and trying to explain their significance to their foreign partners, the students were believed to gain valuable experience in “seeing multiplicity of interpretations of what appears a monolithic image” as well as in “critical thinking about one’s own identity” (Tarasheva and Davcheva 2001: 58–59).

Raising intercultural awareness of students in monocultural and monolingual communities involves challenging their ethnocentric perspectives. The “Human GPS” may serve as a useful metaphor of what one requires for intercultural communication. We need it to locate and orienteer ourselves culturally in order to “navigate in the real world” (Finkbeiner 2009: 153). For the system to work properly we first have to position ourselves culturally, that is start with the perception of our self, our values and attitudes, and next we need to receive other data from at least two “satellites,” that is different cultural perspectives (Finkbeiner 2009: 155). Thanks to our intercultural skills we can process the data and navigate i.e., communicate successfully. Foreign language and intercultural communication classes can make use of the activities that promote “a critical approach to the discovery of the perspectives of the self and other” (Finkbeiner 2009: 156). The learners-navigators are expected to “switch on their Human GPS” and dive deep below the surface of culture to find out about the hidden in order to understand others as well as themselves (Finkbeiner 2009: 160).

Comparing different perspectives for the development of cultural self-awareness as a prerequisite of intercultural competence has been the aim the EU-US Atlantis Program (2009–2011), “Dissemination and Adaptation of the ABC’s of Cultural Understanding and Communication.” Jagiellonian University students have participated in this international educational project, which uses the ABC’s Model (Schmidt and Finkbeiner 2006) to contribute to their development

of skills for intercultural understanding and communication as individuals, language students, teachers, or in another workplace. The ABC's method of creating awareness-raising experiences comprises two preparatory stages: writing one's Autobiography as well as the Biography of their partner, to explore cultural differences and similarities in addition to self- and other- perceptions. The final stage involves writing a Cross-cultural analysis on the basis of what has been learned in the previous stages and from relevant intercultural theories, as well as designing activities for developing intercultural awareness.

3.4. Conclusions

Foreign languages learning gives us access to better understanding of foreign cultures, which is necessary for intercultural communication. At the same time, learning foreign languages and cultures provides motivation for making cross-cultural comparisons and for exploring our own cultural identity, mother tongue, and the environment we live in. Foreign language education may contribute to the students' socio-cultural awareness concerning their own country. While getting an opportunity to reflect on "interpersonal communication competence in intracultural settings" (Aleksandrowicz-Pędich 2009: 27) foreign language students prepare for the roles of visitors abroad or host in their own country, as well as of active citizens and participants of cultural life. According to an intercultural approach to foreign language teaching: "You should first look in the mirror at your own culture, and out of the window at other cultures you are interested in or want to interact with" (Huber-Kriegler, Lázár and Strange 2003: 7).

QUESTIONS AND TASKS

1. How would you explain to foreign language students that a common language shared between the participants of an intercultural exchange is a necessary but insufficient condition for successful communication? Give examples from your own experience or literature.
2. How would you define intercultural competence to make it useful for your own teaching practice?
3. How does intracultural competence help foreign language users become intercultural mediators?
4. Which school/university subjects contribute to the development of cultural self-awareness and knowledge? How can foreign language teachers make use of this fact?

5. Which aspects of the five components in Byram's model of intercultural competence (1997: Ch. 3) would be easiest/most difficult to introduce in your teaching context?
6. Could "willingness to relativise one's own cultural viewpoint and cultural value-system" or "willingness and ability to distance oneself from conventional attitudes to cultural difference" be a problem for the students and teachers in a foreign language class? Why?
7. Which arguments could help to convince foreign language teachers that knowing how to present one's own cultural identity to others should be one of their professional competences?
8. Use "home ethnography" and "intracultural dialogue" to make a list of the most sensitive areas/issues concerning your own culture. Write up some guidelines for a foreigner visiting your country to help him/her avoid dangerous topics in a conversation, behave in a culturally accepted manner at home or in the workplace, etc.
9. Collect visual representations of your region/country. Use the Internet exchange to ask your foreign partners or virtual ethnography to find visual equivalents in a foreign culture.
10. Find and compare texts dealing with the same social or cultural topic but written in different languages and for different socio-cultural contexts, e.g. school/family life, shopping, entertainment, choosing career, problems of local communities.
11. Evaluate tasks and contents from the most popular EFL coursebooks used in your country according to the principles of an intercultural approach. In what way do these EFL coursebooks help to develop the five components of intercultural competence from Byram's model?
12. Design new activities based on authentic materials or adapted from coursebooks to match the criteria of an intercultural approach.
13. Write "Cultural Detective: Your Own National Culture," which will include examples of critical incidents concerning your home culture. Provide explanations to illustrate how cultural barriers can obstruct communication despite the speakers' linguistic competence, and suggest solutions to overcome specific communication problems.

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